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## Williams, Frederick Ronald (Fred) (1927–1982)

by **James Mollison**

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Frederick Ronald Williams (1927–1982), painter and etcher, was born on 23 January 1927 at Richmond, Melbourne, third child of Victorian-born parents Albert Augustus Williams, electrician, and his wife Florence Myrtle, née Phillips. At an early age Fred decided that he would be an artist. His father, a very practical man, hoped that he would become an architect but, in the meantime, at 14 he was apprenticed to a firm of shop-fitters. In November 1943 he enrolled in evening drawing classes at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School, working during the day in the drafting office of T. S. Gill, Prahran. At art school he followed tradition-bound procedures, learning to draw from plaster casts, before entering the life-class and painting school as a full-time student in term three 1946. Surviving paintings and a group of drawings show that he absorbed the teachings of the new head of the school, the tonal realist artist (Sir) William Dargie.

Williams competed in the 1947 travelling scholarship of the gallery school, which usually signalled the end of training, and returned in 1948 as an evening student in painting. Wanting more

### Life Summary [\[details\]](#)

#### Birth

23 January 1927  
Richmond, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

#### Death

22 April 1982  
Hawthorn, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

#### Cause of Death

cancer (not specified)

#### Occupation

- etcher
- painter

instruction in technique, composition and art history which were not taught at the gallery school, he took what he referred to as a 'post graduate' course at the independent George Bell school, which had introduced the teaching of French modernism to Melbourne. During intermittent attendance (1948-50) at Saturday life-drawing classes he took in Bell's talk of technique: put down the picture in underpaint; glaze the darks with paint thinned in transparent varnish and scumble in the highlights with normal opaque paint. He also enjoyed Bell's discussion of composition in the work of old masters and modern painters. In February 1951 with his friends Ian Armstrong and Harry Rosengrave he showed a group of his figure paintings and portraits at the respected Stanley Coe Gallery. As a student he had seen exhibitions by the older established painters Albert Tucker, (Sir) Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd. While he respected them, he did not want to follow their basic techniques. He thought 'their paintings were very romantic and [did] not have enough substance'.

Believing he still had a lot to learn, Williams sailed in December 1951 for London. Within days of arriving he found work with a leading picture-framer and enrolled in night classes in life-drawing at the Chelsea School of Art. He was already a well-trained student; exposure to great art in the museums and dealer galleries in London and to the prints and drawing department of the British Museum was the spur that he needed. Still thinking of himself primarily as a figure painter — 'not figurative, figures' he said — he found painting difficult without a studio or money for materials.

Williams discovered that outdoor sketching was still possible, using gouache on paper and offcuts of cardboard from the framers. Inspired by the prints of Rembrandt and Goya and others at the British Museum he turned to etching. He enrolled in 1953 for a term in a night course at the Central School of Arts and Crafts to learn the techniques of etching and, in 1953-56, he used the facilities of the etching department at the Chelsea School of Art to print from plates he drew and etched at home. The fifty-three etchings he made of London music-hall subjects are a highlight of Australian printmaking and had an outstanding impact when the British Museum showed the most important of them in 2004 in an exhibition, Fred Williams: From Music Hall to Landscape.

Chronic asthma forced Williams to return to Australia in December 1956. He told James Gleeson in 1978 that when he stepped off the ship at Fremantle the light and the landscape had struck him: 'I just thought I would like to paint some pictures of it'. He realised that he could use the landscape, as previously he had used figures, as a vehicle for formal artistic invention. 'I don't want to give the impression that I love the bush, and because I love it I want other people to love

it. I simply want to paint pictures from it.'

In London Williams had realised his interest was in French post-impressionism and Cézanne in particular. At the time 'the whole story of contemporary painting was too big for me . . . [I] thought withdrawal was the best for time to work it out. . . Modern trends were too many and too good'. Back in Melbourne, his study of Cézanne helped him with the formal aspects of his pictures and continued to be influential throughout his subsequent career. For a few months in 1960-61, again in the spirit of needing to know more, he made a serious investigation of the innovative pictorial space of the pioneer Cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, and followed this by a dozen exercises applying the principles of Mondrian's paintings with their geometric grids around squares that seem to vibrate just above or below the surface of the canvas.

From 1957 Williams regularly showed his work. In March 1961 he married Eve Lynette (Lyn) Watson, whom he had met in early 1960 while painting at Sherbrooke in the Dandenong Ranges. They moved into a flat in South Yarra and he maintained a small studio in Exhibition Street. In winter 1962 all his artistic influences were subsumed when, over four Sunday outdoor sketching excursions, he painted a dozen gouaches looking down on the flat, featureless lava plain that reaches from the You Yangs, a range of granite hills between Melbourne and Geelong, to the equally flat plane of the water of Port Phillip Bay. From the highest point of the range Williams selected his subject from the middle distance of the extensive view, looking down on the junctions of a few paddocks and the pattern of the scrubby trees that clustered about the fences that divided them. He ignored the horizon line, which was kilometres beyond the paddocks, and painted a steep-rising landscape seemingly without end. He disregarded the idea of seasonal change of colour in the landscape. Australia, he said, was the same colour everywhere if you pulled the skin off.

In 1962 Williams joined the Rudy Komon Art Gallery, Sydney. This was the start of the stellar rise in his reputation, as he won prizes and made significant sales to the public galleries in Melbourne, Canberra, Perth, Brisbane and Sydney. In the oil-over-tempera pictures that he painted early in 1964 — one being his entry in the Helena Rubinstein travelling art scholarship competition, which he won — he represented the land with grounds of ochre-coloured, transparent varnish, on which he disposed exquisite small multi-toned, brush-loads of paint in patterns that formed subtle grids and described the way cleared Australian farming country was marked by the trunks of surviving trees and blobs of low, modest foliage of other plants struggling to survive in cleared paddocks.

The Williams family moved to Upwey, south-east of Melbourne, in August 1963. He and Lyn used the Rubinstein prize money in the second half of 1964 to tour monuments of successive architectural styles and galleries in Europe. In 1967 he had his first commercially successful, sell-out exhibition with Komon. The Williamses moved to Hawthorn, an inner Melbourne suburb, in 1969. His years of public service began in 1972 with his appointment to the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (from 1973 the Australian National Gallery Acquisitions Committee and later the Council of the National Gallery of Australia) of which Williams remained a member until his death. He was also an inaugural member (1973-75) of the Visual Arts Board of the Australian Council for the Arts.

In 1977 Williams was invited to exhibit his gouaches at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. This was an opportunity for him to begin his career anew with an international audience. The show was well received and four New York dealers approached him to represent his work. He decided that this would be too difficult; he preferred to continue his painting and etching from Melbourne, managed by Komon.

Over time Williams's paintings have benefited from his technique, the application of layers of opaque paint over transparent glazes that have changed as he planned; the oil paint and the glazes yellow a little, darken slightly and become much more transparent, creating veils of colour. He painted over these subtle coloured surfaces with marks of opaque paint that in their great variety touch two chords in viewers; they are an uncanny representation of a kind of Australian landscape Australians had never admired before he chose to paint it, and they are placed to create eye paths within the painting so that the viewer can wander visually across and through the landscape depicted in the work. These marks also meet an intellectual need as observers search for the formal structure of the painting, its construction around implied diagonal, vertical and horizontal lines.

Alongside his painting practice Williams made some 400 prints including 239 landscape etchings, notable for the sense of invention he brought to the medium through the use of marks that can only be obtained by printing from an etched plate. The often daring abstract qualities of the prints reveal, as the image becomes familiar to the viewer, that he has started with something seen in the landscape which has left its indelible mark in the work.

A seamless unity developed in Williams's art on paper and canvas as innovations were translated from one medium to another. The etchings had a major influence on his paintings when some of the smallest marks in the prints were developed into the minimalist Australian landscapes of 1969: large ochre or grey fields sprinkled with trees, seen as if from a mapmaker's viewpoint. He took this up again in 1976 when he painted the first aerial views in Western art of recognisable country, rivers and coastline.

The ochres that had become a Williams trademark gave way in the 1970s to experiments with primary and secondary colours, forced upon him by the introduction of colour television, which raised new colour expectations. It took him four years to master the use of his new palette of bright complementary colours, during which time a strong sense of design emerged; landscape often being reduced to a few geometric planes. He has become recognised as one of the great colourists in Australian art, the integrity of his combinations unalterable as much as they are surprising.

The final flowering of Williams's art was in the paintings of Weipa, and the following Pilbara series. The first group came after a 1977 trip to the outback mining operations of Comalco Ltd at Weipa on Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, where he had his first extensive view of the land from a light plane. He undertook two extended trips in 1979 to the Pilbara region of Western Australia as the guest of Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia Ltd. He waited for two years before taking up the gouaches made on the spot and those made after his experience of many plane trips, before putting down the Pilbara oils in seventeen days in March-June 1981. Some of the Pilbara paintings were finished in this session and these final master works are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. He painted the bright light over the landscape as he saw it late in the afternoon; the colour of the paintings is unexpected but accurate. The perspective in some of these works is a bird's-eye view and in others a view of the horizon line seen at an angle from a plane coming in to land. The beauty of the paint in colour and texture of these paintings, as in so many of Williams's pictures, is exceptional in late twentieth-century art.

Williams was appointed OBE in 1976 and was awarded an honorary doctorate of law by Monash University in 1980. He died of cancer aged 55 on 22 April 1982 at East Hawthorn, survived by his wife and their three daughters. Over twenty years Komon had sold 140 important oils, around the same number of gouaches, and a few score prints for Williams. Williams is well represented in




Australian collections, particularly in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and the National Gallery of Victoria. Paintings and art on paper are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Tate Gallery, London, with a major group in the department of prints and drawings at the British Museum. A retrospective exhibition, *Fred Williams: An Australian Vision*, at the British Museum in 2004, cemented his reputation as an artist of world interest.

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- [Burn, Ian Lee](#) (employee) 

- **Komon, Rudolph John** (acquaintance) 
- **Bell, George Frederick Henry** (teacher) 
- **Burke, Joseph Terence** (sitter) 

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